ORGANIZED LOOTING

The Basis of Partisan Warfare

Leo Heiman

NEARLY all books published in recent years on the subject of guerrilla warfare have one serious shortcoming in common. They speak of partisan operations and tactics, motivation, and psychology, but fail to underline the problems of supply and transportation. Most authors dismiss the subject of partisan logistics with such stereotype phrases as "guerrillas live off the land," and "partisans have no transportation problems because they move on foot and carry whatever supplies they need on their backs."

These are dangerous misconceptions, despite the grains of truth they contain. The fact is that adequate supply and transportation are the basis of potent guerrilla warfare. A few small bands can exist without logistics, but no organized insurgency or centrally directed partisan movement is possible without tackling the thorny problem of logistics at its grassroots level.

There is a good reason why the

problem of guerrilla logistics is not appreciated by most students of insurgencies and partisan operations. Few authors of books devoted to the subject of guerrilla warfare have been guerrillas themselves. And a study of books written by former partisan commanders sheds little light on this vital area.

Since nearly all partisan commanders must solve the problem of logistics by organized looting, extortion, and pillage, they are naturally ashamed to admit it in their books and memoirs. They may speak at length about blowing up trains, ambushing enemy troops, recruiting enthusiastic volunteers, or operating cloak-and-dagger undergrounds next door to enemy police headquarters. But they are not proud of having deprived some impoverished peasant of his last loaf of bread, having robbed a poor widow and her children of their last goat, or suffered heavy casualties just for a few sacks of potatoes.

Yet, this, too, is partisan reality. Few will admit it, but logistics cause more partisan casualties than any type of enemy action.

The large-scale looting of a civilian population, which forms the cornerstone of partisan logistics and the very basis of guerrilla operations, is nothing to be proud of. No Communist authority on the subject, from Mao Tse-tung to "Ché" Guevara, will admit having looted the peasants. In their books the population is "eagerly assisting the partisans, out of its own desire to speed up the process of liberation." This is not true.

Former Soviet, Polish, and Greek partisan commanders either do not mention the subject at all or claim to have subsisted on supplies captured from the enemy. This, too, is not true. The truth is that no large-scale guerrilla movement can exist and operate without organized looting of the civilian population. Since, at the same time, the movement requires the population's sympathy and support, the problems of supply and transportation are often the worst dilemma a guerrilla chief must face.

Misused Dogma

When I served with the Reconnaissance Detachment of the Rokossovsky Brigade of Soviet Partisan Forces in the forests of Belorussia in World War II, more than one carefully conceived and planned guerrilla operation failed because of inadequate transportation and supply. The misused dogma that "guerrillas live off the land and move on foot" applies only to small units. When my unit was less than 50 strong in the summer of 1942, it had no logistic problems to speak of. Food was available in any village and on every farm, shelter was provided by the overhanging branches of old gnarled trees, and we could march on foot undisturbed up to 40 kilometers a day in any direction we chose.

But our impact as guerrillas was insignificant. We killed Nazi policemen, cut telephone and telegraph wires, hanged German-appointed village headmen and pro-Nazi collaborators, burned a few wooden trestle

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bridges, and ambushed a few police vehicles on the roads. These local pinpricks gave us a good feeling, boosted our prestige with the local populace, and made the Germans angry. But

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they did not influence the outcome of decisive Eastern Front campaigns, did not harm the Nazi war machine, and did not contribute to the ultimate German defeat in the Soviet Union. Only an organized, centrally directed partisan campaign could do that.

In the summer of 1943 our outfit grew to a full-fledged partisan brigade, about 1,200 strong. We maintained a regular channel of communication with the Central Headquarters of the Partisan Movement in Moscow and had a powerful radio transmitter and a small landing strip in the forest.

During the crucial battle of Kursk-Orel in July 1943, our brigade was ordered to paralyze German railway communications near the Ivatsevitshi causeway in the Polesski Marshes. The main Warsaw-Moscow Railroad passed over this causeway, and up to 200 German trains thundered along its double tracks every day with ammunition, fuel, reinforcements, and supplies. Our sabotage detachments had mined the railroad despite German security precautions. Blowing up two or three trains a day only slowed down the German volume of traffic, however, but did not halt it entirely.

A plan was worked out by representatives of the Central Partisan

Headquarters who had parachuted into our camp, in consultation with local guerrilla chiefs, to attack the fortified stations on both sides of the causeway with units in brigade strength, pin down the enemy, and blow up the tracks to prevent reinforcements being rushed by armored train from the nearest city.

While one partisan brigade attacked a whistlestop station 24 kilometers west of the causeway, and another assaulted the Byten junction east of Ivatsevitshi, the Rokossovsky Brigade was assigned the task of blowing up the causeway.

Advantages and Disadvantages

To make the attack possible, Soviet transport aircraft dropped containers with *PTR* antitank rifles, ammunition, delayed-action bombs, a few thousand "soap cakes" of TNT, fuzes, and detonators. The *PTR* antitank rifle was a relatively new Soviet weapon at that time, and, while it was soon obsolete against the new German *Tiger* tanks, it was the ideal weapon for partisans. Its accuracy was amazing, and a trained *PTR* crew could hit the boiler of a railway locomotive at 800 meters. This enabled us to ambush German trains in daylight, shooting them up from a safe distance.

The *PTR's* only disadvantage, as far as we guerrillas were concerned, was its size and weight. It required two men to carry it, and a third to haul the boxes of ammunition. Since we had to cross some 30 kilometers of marshy ground to get within shooting distance of the Ivatsevitshi causeway, we needed peasant carts and horses for the *PTR's*, heavy machineguns, explosives, bombs, and ammunition.

In theory, we could start one or two days earlier and move on foot across the swamps. In practice, this was impossible. No trees grew in the marshes, and the low clumps of vegetation and prickly bushes did not provide adequate cover. German reconnaissance aircraft made daily flights along the main railroad line, and we would be caught out in the open if we tried to bivouac in the swamps in daytime. Moreover, an attack on the causeway, across minefields and barbed wire and under heavy enemy fire, was not going to be a pushover The assault units had to be fresh and rested, not worn out after a forced 30-kilometer march across swamps, carrying the heavy *PTR's* and ammunition boxes on their backs.

Our commander decided, therefore, that we would round up some 300 peasant carts and horses, load the entire brigade upon them, and move out at dusk, taking a detour via hard-packed village dirt tracks. This would bring us to the Ivatsevitshi station at midnight. The horse carts would also enable us to evacuate our wounded and be back in the forest by dawn.

We also had to consider the possibility of a strong German antipartisan offensive. This would force us to retreat to another forest, abandoning our supply dumps of potatoes, cabbage, smoked meat, and flour. The men had to be fed, and we were ordered to seize pigs, cows, sheep, flour, potatoes, and other staple foods when we picked up the carts and horses.

Villages Stripped

This was easier said than done. The villages in our own partisan-controlled zone had been impoverished by constant raids and supply operations. Not a single horse was left in most of them. Many had been razed by the Germans during punitive expe-

ditions and antipartisan offensives. Crops had been destroyed, cattle slaughtered, and the peasants wiped out or driven into the forest. This meant that we had to get our supplies from villages outside the partisan-controlled zone.

Most such villages had strong police or home guard garrisons, though, which greeted us with machinegun and rifle fire. Looting pigs and horses and robbing the peasants of their bread and potatoes was a very prosaic mission without any heroics and glory. But it was more difficult than blowing up a train or ambushing an enemy convoy on the road. It was more dangerous, too.

We were not the only partisan brigade operating in the district. Other units also needed horses and had to collect foodstuffs. The result was that after one week of hectic activity and suffering numerous casualties, we could provide only 92 peasant carts and horses—less than one-third the number required. No matter how hard we tried, we could do no better.

Accordingly, our brigade commander ordered all *PTR's*, heavy machineguns, TNT, and ammunition loaded upon the available carts and rushed to the causeway as planned. Our mounted Reconnaissance Detachment and the Brigade Sabotage Company provided escort for the *PTR* squads. The rifle companies and special assault detachments—armed with submachineguns and grenades only—moved out on foot across the marshes.

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What happened was the most disastrous defeat our brigade had ever suffered. Our Reconnaissance Detachment and the horse cart convoy arrived on time and deployed as planned. But the bulk of our brigade had bogged down in the swamps. By the time they arrived, tired, wet, and worn out, the battle had already raged for more than three hours on both sides

of the causeway, and the Germans were ready for us. Our first two attacks were repulsed with heavy casualties, and when we regrouped for the third assault, dawn broke over the eastern skyline and the brigade commander ordered a general retreat. Having lost more than 100 dead and wounded without any tangible results, he refused to expose the brigade to inevitable German Luftwaffe bombing and strafing after sunrise.

We failed to achieve our main objective—the destruction of the vital causeway. German trains kept moving to the Kursk-Orel battlefront. We failed to accomplish our mission because of insufficient transportation.

Food Problems

Transportation is only one of the numerous logistic problems which confront a guerrilla leader. It is easy to say that partisans "live off the land," but what if villages have been razed, the farmers deported or massacred, crops destroyed, and cattle slaughtered? Partisans are free of supply worries only in the orthodox military sense. They can live without regular rations, blankets, underwear, shoelaces, and toothpaste. But they must eat.

Even where the local populace is friendly, sympathizes with the guerrillas, and is genuinely willing to help —which is frequently not the case— providing the necessary amounts of staple foodstuffs remains guerrilla problem number one. Any former partisan leader who mentions the problems of feeding his men must admit that most of the food, clothes, horses, and tools had to be looted from the peasants.

Looting was comparatively easy in Russia, the Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belorussia during the first year of World War II. The farmers still had their cows, sheep, goats, chickens, and horses, and even the kolkhoz collectives, taken over intact by the Germans, could provide flour, potatoes, and meat for partisan raiding parties.

But in the summer of 1942, during the first Battle of Stalingrad, the Germans made a major effort to wipe out the partisans operating in their rear areas. Regular infantry divisions on their way to the battlefront were disembarked from trains a few hundred kilometers behind the frontlines, and marched on foot across the guerrilla-infested zones, combing out the forests en route. This delayed the arrival of German reinforcements at the battlefront and proved to be ineffective. Guerrilla units scattered ahead of the German steamroller, moved to another location, and reassembled after the German comb-out waves had disappeared.

Scorched-Earth Policy

The Germans did one thing, however, which made later partisan operations difficult. They burned villages, razed farms, and seized all cattle and horses. The peasants who did not flee were either killed or deported to slave labor camps. The scorched-earth policy forced the partisans to get their food and horses in villages within the German-controlled zones—within shooting range of police forts, railroad stations, fortified strongholds, military barracks, and cities with strong garrisons.

To solve the thorny problems of logistics, the Central Headquarters of the Soviet Partisan Movement devised a 10-point program, good in theory, but unworkable in actual practice.

Stealing was strictly forbidden, and partisans found guilty of theft were

executed by firing squad, without being granted the right to appeal the death sentence. A guerrilla became guilty of theft if he took anything without first informing the property's owner of the seizure's purpose and identifying himself as a member of the Soviet partisan forces.

Initially, the Central Headquarters' instructions commanded the partisans to issue receipts for anything seized from the farmers. The receipts had to be signed by partisan commanders or commissars. But the signed receipt system was misused by bandit gangs and criminal elements posing as partisans who robbed the peasants, issued fancy receipts, and promised to redeem everything after the Soviet Army returned to the occupied regions.

Receipt System Ends

New instructions eventually put an end to the signed receipt system. Only brigade or detachment commanders were authorized to order seizures of food, clothing, or animals, and to conduct expropriation operations.

Looting of money, jewelry, toilet articles, personal effects, and, in fact, anything but basic foods, horses, and working tools, was forbidden. Infractions against this rule were punishable by death.

Small groups of partisans detached from their units on sabotage reconnaissance and other missions entailing an absence of more than 24 hours from camp were authorized to enter farms and villages and ask for food. They could also seize horses to facilitate their movement or to evacuate their wounded.

As a rule, these instructions were obeyed by most guerrilla formations. But there were many loopholes and exceptions which led to rape, murder, wholesale pillaging, and other excesses.

Notorious Order

The most notorious loophole was Order 100-JAT which authorized the execution of "enemies of the people," their immediate relatives, and the confiscation of their property. Up to the spring of 1943, only real traitors and pro-Nazi collaborators—German-appointed village headmen and police chiefs—were so classified and were shot or hanged. Order 100-JAT, flashed by radio to all partisan units in May 1943, changed this. Now, all persons employed by the German administration who willingly facilitated the enemy's war effort or helped the occupation regime were to be classified as "enemies of the people." A railroad stationmaster, for example, who went on working for the Germans thus became an enemy of the people, and was placed on the liquidation lists unless he agreed to cooperate with the partisans, leak vital information to their agents, and plant time bombs supplied by guerrilla saboteurs.

The order opened new vistas for partisan looting. Since everything had to be confiscated or destroyed, everything could be looted. Before that, most seasoned partisans preferred two combat missions to one supply operation which was dangerous and tedious. But now there was no lack of volunteers for operations within the framework of Order 100-JAT and most "enemies of the people," real and imaginary, took refuge in German-held cities. With sources dwindling, partisan commanders had to think fast to keep their men dressed and fed. The result was the "Double Quota" order.

German occupation authorities had imposed agricultural delivery quotas

upon every farm and village. Peasants who fell behind in handing over eggs, butter, milk, meat, and wool for the occupation authorities were flogged the first time, seriously beaten for the second offense, and hanged in the marketplace the third time.

The Double Quota order opened with a lofty preamble that supplying agricultural deliveries to the enemy was tantamount to treason, since it helped the German war effort in the Soviet Union. A village which honored its supply commitments to the Germans would be "severely punished" (burned) by "provisional Soviet authorities" (partisans), unless it supplied twice as much to the "defenders of the people" (partisans).

The result was that most villages were looted and burned either by the partisans, for failing to comply with the Double Quota order, or by the Germans, for having halted agricultural deliveries to the occupation authorities. All this generated additional hatreds and bitterness which served our over-all political-psychological purpose, but which complicated our supply problems a hundredfold.

In my opinion, the problems of partisan logistics are common to guerrilla and insurgency operations in all parts of the world. Asian partisans may be capable of marching 48 kilometers a day on a cupful of rice, but they need that rice to begin with. They may not need horses, but they need canal boats or junks for the movement of supplies and support weapons, evacuation of wounded, and rapid transportation of assault units under the cover of darkness. They may pick up hundreds of weapons from ambushes, raids, and battlefields, but they still need a sufficient quantity of ammunition for any prolonged fighting. They live off the land to some extent, but their logistics are difficult, complicated, and vulnerable.

The time appears at hand to extend our thinking to embrace a triple-purpose concept for ground combat operations in which counterinsurgency operations and other types of US military participation overseas in time of nominal peace are a normal third principal mission of the Army going hand in hand with nuclear warfare and conventional warfare.

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